

How to Conduct Collaborative Action Research

Richard Sagor

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN - MADISON
INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS CENTER
225 NORTH MILLS STREET
MADISON, WISCONSIN 53706

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1

Why We Need Collaborative Action Research

ON SOME ISSUES OF SCHOOLING, THERE SEEMS TO BE NO DISPUTE. No one would question that fostering student growth and development is the primary objective of our public school system. Likewise, no thoughtful observer would disagree that student growth and development are the direct result of instructional interactions between student and teacher. When we hold these twin beliefs—that schools are about student learning and that learning occurs primarily through the efforts and talents of teachers—then it becomes clear that school reform should focus on nurturing and developing the teaching profession. The highest priority of school reform should be to create conditions that support teachers in their work and make teaching an attractive option for the best and brightest college graduates.

Unfortunately, many of the more celebrated restructuring initiatives focus on issues regarding school governance, financing, the use of technology, and innovative instructional strategies. Although all these efforts have some potential for improving the teaching environment (and, consequently, the learning environment), I believe they skirt the central issue, which is restructuring the teaching profession itself. But why, you may ask, is restructuring necessary? And how does collaborative action research fit in? To answer the first question, let's contrast teaching with several other professions and examine some areas where it falls short.

Teaching Versus Other Professions

A few key factors clearly distinguish public school teaching from other service professions. Understanding these factors will make it easier to see why teaching is not often viewed as an attractive option by bright college graduates.

Isolation from Other Professionals

Follow a doctor, a lawyer, an engineer, or an architect for a day, and it becomes obvious that they spend as much time interacting with their colleagues as they do serving their clients. A doctor discusses the meaning of an X-ray with other physicians and healthcare workers, a lawyer consults with associates on trial strategy, and engineers and architects work in teams to develop new prototypes and designs. Interactions with other professionals stimulate and push these people to new levels of performance in both the art and the craft of their profession.

Teachers work in a different world. Roland Barth likened American teachers to a group of preschoolers engaged in parallel play. Although they may work in a building with other teachers and even use the same materials and follow the same schedule, they rarely turn to one another during the school day except during their thirty-minute lunch period, where informal norms often forbid any kind of professional talk. This dearth of collegial stimulation would be bad enough if teaching were a profession with a certain and finite knowledge base. But the problems of teaching are ever changing, and absolute solutions are usually not to be found. Successful teaching is a mixture of art and craft honed through experience. In such a profession, a lack of meaningful discourse with fellow professionals can have disastrous effects.

In surveys of promising young teachers who decided to abandon education after only a few years in the classroom, professional isolation has been one of the most frequently cited dissatisfiers. If we continue to expect teachers to solve increasingly complex educational problems by themselves, we can forget about widespread excellence in the classroom. Most inquisitive and collaborative people will

continue to shy away from teaching. And those who do take the plunge will probably confine themselves to the few teaching strategies they've found are easiest for them to use, keeping their door shut for fear of exposing to colleagues that they have not yet mastered this unmasterable craft.

Contributions to the Knowledge Base

All professions are informed by a knowledge base, and teaching is no exception. We have a body of accepted research literature on effective teaching practices and successful schooling techniques. As in other professions, teachers are expected to be familiar with, make use of, and respect the foundations of their practice. But in all the professions *except* teaching, practitioners are also expected to interact with and contribute to the development of their profession's knowledge base.

For instance, pick up any medical journal and you will find that most of the articles are written by practicing physicians. The formats are remarkably similar. The author first explains the patient's symptoms and then details the treatment. The author/physician concludes by sharing the results of the treatment. The function of this medical literature is to alert other physicians to what colleagues are learning. Were I a doctor reading such articles, I would ask myself: (1) Do my patients have similar symptoms? and (2) If they do, should I attempt similar interventions?

The story for other professions runs along the same lines. Engineers work from a knowledge base created by generations of engineers and learn continually from their colleagues; their work, in turn, informs the next generation of innovation. Architects draw plans based on the work of other architects, and lawyers construct briefs and legal arguments based on the experience of other lawyers.

Once again, teachers are different. Most educational journals (with the notable exception of *Educational Leadership*) do not feature the work of public school teachers. Instead, they are vehicles for the dissemination of ideas, commentaries, and studies from professors, consultants, administrators, and the like, who work outside the world of the classroom. The topics, problems, or issues

pursued are significant, but not necessarily helpful to teachers on the front line. The context of the interventions reported or discussed in the education journals comprising our knowledge base may or may not conform to the realities of the public school classroom. In education, the worlds of research and practice are both separate and unequal, for the teacher who ignores research is likely seen as anti-intellectual or unprofessional, whereas the researcher who ignores the classroom bears no such label.

In fact, policymakers and supervisors often demand that teachers implement this externally derived educational research in their classrooms. The prevailing paradigm in education is one of the supervisor telling workers how to do their work because the supervisor supposedly has superior knowledge. This model is not without precedent. It is the very model of blue-collar work: The foreman always knows best, and it is the line workers' job to simply follow directions and meet his expectations. While that approach is increasingly seen as problematic in the trades, it is clearly disastrous for endeavors that we think of as professional. Until teachers become involved in generating the knowledge that informs their practice, they will remain cast as subordinate workers rather than dynamic professionals.

Separation of Quality Control

In most professions, standards of excellence emerge from the profession itself. The work of the master establishes the target for others who follow. Furthermore, monitoring the bottom line is seen as necessary for maintaining a professional edge. Self-monitoring helps professionals set their own improvement agendas. For example, by examining the needs of their patients and the results of their work, doctors determine where their professional development energies should be placed. Similarly, by studying completed projects, architects and engineers determine how designs for future projects might be improved. In short, in most professional arenas, the person doing the work is also the person assessing the work.

Most public schools, however, are more like assembly lines, for the quality control officer is usually someone

above and apart from the teacher. Data on teacher performance are assembled, assessed, and analyzed at levels far removed from the student-teacher interface. A state legislature or a school board often analyzes the previous year's standardized achievement tests and then prescribes an improvement agenda for the state's or district's teachers. Or a principal may reflect on her perceptions of teachers' performance at the school and then prescribe a canned remedy that she thinks is just what the faculty needs.

Most people would agree that no accountability system is as powerful as self-regulation. The standards we set for ourselves are almost always higher than those others would set for us. When we work in systems where others set the standards, we are often inclined to passively resist or to negatively sanction our rate-busting peers.

In the school business, the operative rule is: "He who controls the data controls the agenda." If data on student performance are the property of those outside the classroom, it is those outsiders who determine the pertinent issues and, based on those issues, the further data to be collected. And based on those data, they are free to impose improvement agendas on classroom teachers. Absent any alternative and compelling data of their own, classroom teachers have to bow to the data of their supervisors.

As long as teaching remains a profession where isolation is the norm, where the knowledge that informs practice comes from outside the classroom, and where the quality control officers are removed from the classroom, teaching will be more like a blue-collar job than an intellectual professional pursuit. Eliminating these destructive features is essential to the health of the profession and the success of our schools. By changing the role of teachers, we can also profoundly change the teaching and learning process in our schools. This is not mere speculation. Judith Warren Little (1982) examined instructionally effective schools and found that certain cultural norms tend to prevail. For example, in the most successful schools, teachers are more likely to discuss teaching and learning with one another, to critique each other's work, to collaborate on the preparation of materials, and to jointly design lessons. Little concluded that the

norms of collegiality and experimentation were essential ingredients of the work culture of an effective school.

Jon Saphier and Matthew King (1985), summarizing the research on effective school cultures, list twelve norms that distinguish schools where student growth and development are more likely to occur:

1. Collegiality
2. Experimentation
3. High expectations
4. Trust and confidence
5. Tangible support
6. Reaching out to the knowledge bases
7. Appreciation and recognition
8. Caring, celebration, and humor
9. Involvement in decision making
10. Protection of what's important
11. Traditions
12. Honest, open communication

Now we come to the second question posed at the beginning of this chapter: How does collaborative action research fit in? The collaborative action research process outlined in this book is a proven way to foster the very norms that Little and Saphier and King found to be characteristic of effective schools, and that I have shown to be characteristic of most professional occupations. In essence, collaborative action research is a process that enables teachers to improve the teaching-learning process while also contributing to the development of their own profession.

2 Defining Collaborative Action Research

WE CAN BEST UNDERSTAND THE PROCESS OF COLLABORATIVE ACTION research by examining the meaning behind each of the three words used to identify it. Let's begin with the word "action," because action is what distinguishes collaborative action research from the research that most of us have experienced in the past.

The Meaning of "Action"

Traditionally, scientific research has been conducted by professional full-time researchers. They generally choose their topics based on their personal predilections or the preference of journal editors, and they publish reports of their work with the hope that someone will someday make use of it. But even if no one does, their work is usually complete upon publication of their report.

Action research, on the other hand, is conducted by people who want to do something to improve *their own situation*. When other people read about their work, notice it, or make use of it, that is simply icing on the cake. Action researchers undertake a study because they want to know whether they can do something in a better way.

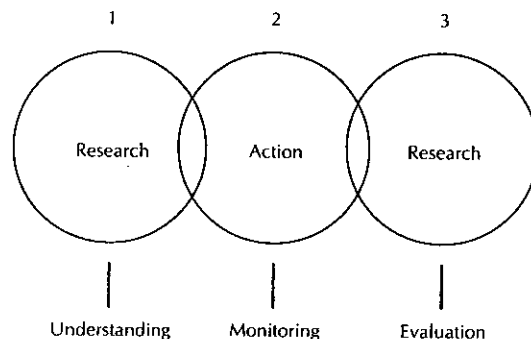
I like to think of scientific researchers as being very much like investigative journalists. They look at what *others* are doing or should be doing. Action researchers, on the other hand, look at what *they themselves* are or should be doing.

Action researchers in education often focus on three related stages of action:

1. Initiating action, such as, adopting a text, choosing an alternative assessment strategy.
2. Monitoring and adjusting action, such as, seeing how a pilot project is proceeding, assessing the early progress of a new program, improving a current practice.
3. Evaluating action, such as, preparing a final report on a completed project.

When we conduct an inquiry for the purpose of initiating action, we are usually seeking information that will help us understand and solve a problem; thus we might call this type of action research "research *for* action." Similarly, when we actually monitor our work so that we can improve our performance, we are engaging in what might be called "research *in* action." Finally, our efforts to evaluate work that has been concluded might be called "research *of* action." Figure 2.1 illustrates what my colleague Peter Holly calls "the three ways into action research."

Figure 2.1
Entry Points for Action Research



The Meaning of "Research"

Research is defined here as any effort toward disciplined inquiry. Many of us have been schooled in the notion that only investigations that can be reduced to numbers qualify as research. As you will see later in this book, action research can involve a wide array of methods derived from both the quantitative and qualitative domains. In any kind of research, however, there are phenomena researchers want to better understand; therefore they employ systematic processes to acquire valid and reliable data concerning those phenomena.

In the collaborative action research process, the focus of the research is defined by the practitioners themselves. Only two guidelines must be followed: (1) the phenomena chosen for study must concern the teaching/learning process, and (2) those phenomena must also be within the practitioner's scope of influence.

The Meaning of "Collaborative"

Nothing should deter anyone from working alone on research. In fact, most teachers who have undertaken action research have worked alone. As a student teacher, for example, you probably reflected on the design and execution of the first lesson you taught. This is classical action research. First, you approached the lesson with a hypothesis on how best to teach some particular material to a specific group of children. Then you collected data. For instance, as you taught the lesson, you watched students' faces for clues about how well your lesson was being received, and during independent practice, you walked around the room to see how students were progressing. You probably also reviewed students' tests or quizzes to ascertain what they learned. Finally, you concluded your research by evaluating all these data and drawing conclusions about how you might teach this material differently, should the opportunity present itself.

The above example contains almost all the elements of a full action research study, minus a plan to write up and share the results. Undoubtedly, if we had continued to use this type of disciplined inquiry throughout our teaching

careers, we would all probably have become more thoughtful teachers and better educators, yet we would still have been working in isolation. By turning to *collaborative* action research, however, we can *renew* our commitment to thoughtful teaching and also begin developing an active community of professionals. The process described in this book is based on teams of practitioners who have common interests and work together to investigate issues related to those interests.

An Overview of the Five-step Process

The process of collaborative action research has five sequential steps:

1. Problem formulation
2. Data collection
3. Data analysis
4. Reporting of results
5. Action planning

1. Problem Formulation

This step, which is described in detail in Chapter 3, helps action researchers identify the issues that are of the greatest professional concern. Researchers identify what they already know about each issue, what they still need to know about it, and their understanding of the variables affecting the issue.

2. Data Collection

Data collection is the heart of the five-step process. The credibility of any research effort lives or dies on the quality of the data used to support its conclusions. To ensure adequate data collection, action researchers, their colleagues, students, and any other persons involved in the research are expected to assemble three sets of data for each research question that surfaced during the problem formulation phase. This second step of the collaborative action research process is looked at more closely in Chapter 4.

3. Data Analysis

If data collection is the heart of the research process, then data analysis is its soul. Most action researchers find this step to be the most enjoyable of the entire process. It involves looking systematically at all the data collected to see what trends or patterns emerge and what conclusions, if any, can be drawn. Chapter 5 explores the data analysis process.

4. Reporting Results

Inviting others to peer over our shoulders and learn from our practice is one of the most powerful and rewarding aspects of collaborative action research. Thus, it is imperative that teams of action researchers find as many appropriate forums as possible to share what they are learning about teaching and learning. Chapter 6 describes several ways to share what has been learned and expand the ring of collegiality.

5. Action Planning

Since the purpose of collaborative action research is to improve our professional practice, the process won't be complete until we have put in place plans incorporating what we've learned as a result of our systematic inquiry. Chapter 7 discusses several processes for using the findings of collaborative action research to plan and implement school and classroom improvement.

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Now that we've looked briefly at the process, we can examine each step in depth.